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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the effects of the Junior Great Books program on the higher level thinking skills of gifted/able learners and on interpretive reading skills development. Three groups of students were observed. They consisted of 83 elementary students in 2 experimental groups, all of whom participated in a Junior Great Books program, and 143 gifted/able second, fourth, and fifth graders in a control group. Students met for 12 sessions to discuss a story (either traditional or modern) that everyone had read in advance, led by adults specially trained by the Great Books Foundation to ask questions that encourage students to think about the meaning of what they have read. Results showed that quantitative measures did not reveal a significant increase in the mean scores of School Ability Indexes on the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, but qualitative measures revealed that the quality of answers significantly improved as a result of participation in the Junior Great Books discussions. Anecdotal records before and after the program indicated that participants exhibited enthusiasm in vocabulary development, increased interest in literature, and positive attitudes toward the special reading program. (JDD)

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A STUDY TO DETERMINE
THE EFFECTS OF THE JUNIOR GREAT BOOKS PROGRAM
ON THE INTERPRETIVE READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
OF GIFTED/ABLE LEARNER CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Providing appropriate materials and methods for the education of gifted children continues to be a focus of assessment of educators of gifted children. Feldhusen (1982) summarized the research of what should be taught to gifted children as three basic modifications to the regular classroom to include more information, higher level material, and faster pace. In an attempt to address higher level material, more specifically higher level thinking skills, many leading gifted education specialists have recommended the use of the Junior Great Books program. The purposes of this study are to determine the effects of the Junior Great Books program on the higher level thinking skills of gifted/able learners as measured by the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (O-LSAT), and to determine the effects of the Junior Great Books program on the interpretive reading skills development of gifted/able learners as measured by an analysis of responses to interpretive questions.

METHODOLOGY

Three groups of students were observed. Group one was a small experimental group consisting of 24 second grade student identified as the top twenty percent of the second grade who participated in a Junior Great Books program.

O-LSAT pretest and posttest scores and anecdotal records were used for comparisons. Group two was also an experimental group consisting of 59 second, third, fourth, and fifth grade students identified at two different schools. These students participated in a Junior Great Books program. O-LSAT pretest and posttest scores as well as anecdotal records were used for comparisons. A control group of 143 gifted/able learners from a center designed to serve an entire school system was used. This group consisted of second, fourth, and fifth graders as pretest and posttest O-LSAT scores of these grades only were available.

THE SPECIAL READING PROGRAM

Dole and Adams (1983) conducted a national survey to determine the perceptions of leaders in the fields of reading and gifted education concerning the specific components of reading curriculum for gifted children. These researchers found that involvement in the Junior Great Books program was regarded as important for gifted children by more than fifty percent of each of the two groups. Flack (1986) in a report to the Library Media Center Programming for the Gifted recommended that media specialists in the elementary and high school levels be trained as discussion leaders in the Junior Great Books Program in an effort to meet the educational needs of gifted readers as an antidote

to the often meager experiences gifted readers encounter in basal programs. Will (1986) described the Junior Great Books program as one appropriate for use with gifted and talented children in developing interpretive thinking skills.

Cooter and Alexander (1984) supported the need for reading programs like the Junior Great Books program for gifted learners because affective dimensions are basic in the development of gifted learners' reading potential. They examined two crucial affective areas--*interest and attitude*--as considerations for reading programs for gifted children. Stank (1983) reviewed the literature on reading and the gifted student at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels and suggested that approaches to instruction for the gifted should include inquiry reading. Bartelo and Cornette (1982) presented a differentiated language arts program to meet the needs of gifted readers. Students were exposed to a wider variety of publishers, rather than confined to a particular basal reading series. In addition to participating in activities designed to help them to read critically, they shared their interpretations in small group discussions. In a response questionnaire to evaluate the program, the researchers found significant improvement in understanding and appreciation of literature. Bagford (1981) contended that a total instructional program for

gifted readers should include vocabulary development, advanced reading skills, and literature.

The Junior Great Books Program is a program of interpretive reading and discussion for students from second grade through high school. It is based on a method of learning called *shared inquiry*. Discussion leaders center discussions on problems of interpretation and view students as partners in a joint effort to uncover new meanings in some of the outstanding works of literature of the past and present. Students in the Junior Great Books program develop the habits of reading critically, interpreting what they read, and supporting their interpretations with ideas and facts from the readings.

Students meet for twelve sessions--usually every two weeks--to discuss a story that everyone has read in advance. Discussions are led by adults who have been specially trained by the Great Books Foundation to ask questions that encourage students to think about the meaning of what they have read. Discussions last from thirty to ninety minutes, depending on the grade level.

The reading series are collections of traditional and modern literature. Students in second, third, and fourth grades read folk and fairy tales. Series 4-9 include excerpts from children's classics and modern short stories. The high school series features short selections from great

works of philosophy, political science, and economics, as well as fiction selections.

The Great Books Foundation, a non-profit education corporation established in 1947 in Chicago, Illinois offers in-service Basic Leader Training courses that prepare teachers and volunteers to use the Junior Great Books series successfully. The Basic Leader Training Course consists of four two and one-half hour sessions and a charge exists for participants.

ANALYSES

In an effort to determine the effects of the Junior Great Books program, two measures were used. The Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, designed to assess the verbal-education domain, was used as pretest and posttest. Anecdotal records of students' written answers prior to discussions were also used to provide qualitative information not measureable with the particular quantitative instrument used in this study. Students were asked two interpretive questions prior to discussions. The quality of the answers was assessed based on a scale of 1-3, one being a surface answer with no evidence, two being a thoughtful answer with no evidence, and three being a thoughtful answer with evidence provided from the story. The researcher assessed responses of the early discussions as well as the final discussions.

A two-way analysis of variance with repeated measures was used to test three hypotheses. Hypothesis one stated that there was no significant interaction between groups and testing periods (pretest and posttest) of the O-LSAT. An ANOVA revealed insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis, thus main effects were tested. Null hypotheses for main effects also revealed that there were no significant main effects for measures or among groups. Table 1 presents the ANOVA information.

Table 1

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE SUMMARY TABLE

Source	df	Sum of Squares	F Value	PR>F
Group	2	70.40221167	0.20	0.8196
Measure	1	31.00198413	0.57	0.4476
G*M	2	106.88986652	0.99	0.3703

Qualitative data revealed that most early discussions responses to interpretive questions were rated one and that most later discussions were rated three which indicates that the quality of answers significantly improved as a result of the participation in the Junior Great Books discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study supports the effectiveness of the Junior Great Books program on the higher level thinking skills of gifted/able learners. While quantitative measures did not reveal a significant increase in the mean scores of School Ability Indexes of the O-LSAT, the scores were not adversely affected. Qualitative measures did reveal that the quality of answers increased as a result of participation in the discussions. Anecdotal records kept by the researcher recorded that participants in the discussions exhibited enthusiasm in vocabulary development, increased interest in literature, and positive attitudes in this special reading program.

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